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AUTHOR Marks, Ronald: Newman, Sally
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ABSTRACT

One hundred-seventy elementary school children in Western Pennsylvania were involved in a pilot study to examine young children's views on aging and the elderly. Approximately half of these children were involved in the Senior Citizen School Volunteer Program which provided consistent classroom contact with a senior citizen resource person. The "Children's Views on Aging" inventory was used to examine the children's views at the beginning of the school year and again at the end of the year following a period of consistent classroom interaction between the children and the senior citizen volunteer. Comparisons were made between the children who had this consistent weekly senior citizen contact and those who did not. The findings suggested that children as young as age six have clear views on aging, many of which are stereotypic, and that children with consistent classroom contact with senior citizen volunteers during this year seem to alter these stereotypic views. There was determined to be a need for further contact between the generations in order to provide children with a healthy understanding of the aging process as it relates to themselves as well as the older senior citizen volunteer. (Author/YLB)

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Title: CHILDREN'S VIEWS ON AGING

Authors: Ronald Marks and Sally Newman

Address: Western Pennsylvania Gerontology Center
Mervis Hall
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh Pennsylvania 15260

Phone: (412) 624-5470

CE 026 377

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Abstract

One hundred seventy elementary school children in Western Pennsylvania were involved in a pilot study to examine young children's views on aging and the elderly. Approximately half of these children were involved in the Senior Citizen School Volunteer Program which provided consistent classroom contact with a senior citizen volunteer in the role of a classroom resource person. This paper describes the "Children's Views on Aging" inventory which was used to examine the children's views at the beginning of the school year and again at the end of the year following a period of consistent classroom interaction between the children and the senior citizen volunteer. The article reports comparisons that were made between the children who had this consistent weekly senior citizen contact and those who did not. The findings suggest that children as young as age six have clear views on aging, many of which are stereotypic and that children with consistent classroom contact with senior citizen volunteers during this year seem to alter these stereotypic views. The article addresses the need for further contact between the generations in order to provide children with a healthy understanding of the aging process as it relates to themselves as well as the older senior citizen volunteer.

CHILDREN'S VIEWS ON AGING

Ronald Marks
Sally Newman

Introduction

Explaining the attitudes of one generation towards another has continued to interest social scientists since the pioneering work of Tuckman and Lorge in the early 1950's. At this time (1953) Tuckman and Lorge concluded from their studies that there was a generally held negative conception of aging and that it is "a reflection of cultural expectations regarding the activities, personalities, characteristics and adjustment of older people" and pointed to a "social climate which is not conducive to feelings of adequacy, usefulness and security and contributes to poor adjustment in their later years." (Tuckman and Lorge, 1953).

Since this time, several studies have attempted a systematic exploration of attitudes towards the old and the aging process (Bengtson, 1971; Bennett, 1976; Harris, 1975; Hickey and Kalish, 1968; Peters, 1971; Storey, 1977).

Generally, their results have been similar. Of the many conclusions reached in these studies, the most prevalent suggest that being old is less desirable than being young, that the old have more negative views of themselves than the young have of themselves, that there is frequent negative stereotyping of the old which often grows out of limited contact and that old age is seen as a very different period of life, offering little satisfaction.

Of these studies, several have indicated that these views of aging and old age are incorporated very early in life, as young as seven years of age (Bennett, 1976; Hickey and Kalish, 1968; Storey, 1977). The value of these studies in revealing the conception and attitudes of the young toward the old is crucial. This is especially the case as behavioral scientists have actively maintained that values, attitudes and beliefs formed and internalized while young will remain throughout the person's live (Newcomb, 1960).

Despite this caution there is a trend in school systems throughout the country to become age-homogeneous environments in which there is little if any opportunity for children to interact with generations other than their own on a regular and intimate basis. This practice of the contemporary school environment should not be ignored for its contribution to the segregation of generations. It is precisely this segregation or lack of opportunity for cross-generational contact of a meaningful nature which has led several contemporary authors to indict the educational system. For example, Norman Cousins suggests, "(some) main failures of education are that it has not prepared people: to comprehend matters concerning human destiny, (or to recognize that) the health of the human species depends on the realization by enough people that they are all connected to one another" (Mehta, 1976).

Sociologically there appears to be justification for nurturing cross-generational contact of children with old people. Several authors suggest there is evidence of similarities within the social structure indicating a compatibility between these groups that is unique and special (Butler and Lewis, 1973; Heckinger, 1977; Kalish, 1969; Seefeldt, 1977). They suggest that there are many ways in which the elderly can still be vitally

relevant to the community and especially to the young. Generally they point out that older people provide a link with the past and that younger people can come to understand the implications of the life span by their contact with older people. Furthermore, older people offer children a sense of familial continuity and a time perspective. Through a comparison of some of the needs of children and the elderly, it appears that reciprocal benefits may be derived from the integration of these two populations in a situation where both can learn, grow and develop confidnece.

In an effort to provide a vehicle for consistent interaction to occur between children and the elderly, the Senior Citizen School Volunteer Program was developed in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. This program which is developing intergenerational classroom models in nine school districts, involves senior citizens as volunteers in classrooms for a minimum of one half day per week during the school year. These volunteers are resource persons who perform many functions: individual and group tutoring, facilitating small group activities, introducing special skills, providing enrichment to the entire class, listening to children and helping children solve academic and social problems.

During the first year of the program's implementation, a pilot study was conducted to begin assessing any changes in children's views on aging that may be related to their consistent interaction with older persons in the classroom. In order to identify changes an instrument "The Children's Views on Aging Inventory" was developed that could report children's knowledge and attitudes towards the aging process and being old. The results of

the pilot study have suggested a need for more systematic examination of these changing views and their relationship to consistent classroom interaction between children and senior citizens.

The administration of the inventory was carried out in two K-6 grade elementary schools in Allegheny County, Western Pennsylvania. One school with 365 pupils and 14 teachers was in a suburban middle class community with 5 teachers and 110 children involved in the Senior Citizen School Volunteer Program. The other school with 265 pupils and 13 teachers was in a small working class community and had 225 pupils and 10 teachers involved in the program. In each of these schools 85% of the teachers volunteered to participate in the Senior Citizen School Volunteer Program. From the entire population participating in the program, seven classes were selected to become involved in the study: one kindergarten, first grade, third grade, fifth grade and sixth grade and two fourth grades.

The study consisted of a pre-test administered in October and a post-test administered in May to an experimental group who were children in the classrooms with a consistent senior citizen volunteer and a comparison group who were the children without senior citizen classroom volunteers A total of 76 children participated in the study, of this number 35 were the comparison group. The study's findings that are discussed in this paper suggest different trends emerging between the classes who had consistent senior citizen contact and those who did not.

The fifteen item inventory was administered verbally to kindergarten and first grade pupils by two members of the senior citizen volunteer program who were the study interviewers. Twelve kindergarten and thirteen first grade pupils chosen randomly from the class roster met individually

with the interviewer in a room close to their classroom. The interviewer was introduced to the class as a visitor who wanted to have a talk with some children about growing old. Each interview lasted between fifteen and twenty minutes during which time the questioner would ask a question and wait for a reply. There was no prompting or coaxing. Each child was given adequate time to respond. The responses were recorded and then the next question was presented. If a child seemed to hesitate or said, "I don't know," the question was repeated a second time.

This same inventory of fifteen items was administered by the classroom teacher in written form to the entire class in grades 3-6. The teachers were given the inventory and a set of guidelines for administering the fifteen items. The total time for class administration was approximately twenty minutes, with items presented orally by the teacher and each child responding by writing at his or her desk.

The design of the inventory included several factors that could contribute to its effectiveness. This effectiveness would be determined by the amount of information gathered that enabled us to make some statements relevant to children's knowledge and views about aging and being old.

The factors that related to effectiveness and which we presumed to be important were:

- its size,
- its ease of administration,
- its age appropriateness,
- its ability to indicate change,
- its implications for the classroom teacher,
- its predictive characteristics.

The fifteen items of the inventory are divided into three sections related to children and the aging process.

Section I - Questions one and two begin to examine the child's understanding of the chronology of aging.

Section II - Questions three - ten relate to the child's experiences with old people.

Section III - Questions eleven - fifteen look at the child' s attitude toward having an older volunteer in the classroom.

Results

Items one and two. "When does a person become old? " and "How do you think it feels to be old? " refer to the child's notion of "oldness. " The responses on the pre-test from the total sample indicate a negative perception of being old with the mean negative recordings in the entire sample equal to 68%.

In the post-test a significant increase was observed in the positive view of aging by those children who had the interegenerational experience (the experimental group). The change noted was from 14% to 42% in the first grade and from 5% to 24% in the third grade. Since this change occurred within five months of the sample population's consistent contact with senior citizen volunteers, we are encouraged that longer term contact may result in a significant change of attitude by large numbers of pupils in this and other similar programs (see Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of Responses
Between Children With Program Involvement and Without Program Involvement
to: "How they think it feels to be old" (n = 76)

	% With Program Involvement				% Without Program Involvement			
	1st		3rd		K		4th	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Positive	14	42	5	24	17	20	16	16
Negative	64	58	86	76	58	70	64	74
Mixed	0	0	9	0	0	0	12	0
Don't Know	22	0	0	0	25	10	8	10

The second grouping of questions are concerned with the child's interaction with "old persons." When asked, "Who do you know that is old?," almost all referred to members of the family with the primary response being grandparents. Other responses included elderly aunts, uncles and occasionally a mention of neighbors or family friends. However, to questions 4 and 5, "Do you have grandparents?" and "Do you think that they are old?," 95% to 100% of the sample indicated that in fact they had grandparents, but approximately 40% indicated their grandparents were not old. One conclusion we might derive from this inconsistency is that the children's general attitude towards old may be based upon some societal influences (e.g., media characterizations) that stereotype grandparents as old. These influences and the consequent negative stereotyping appear to be a contradiction to the children's experiences with their aging relatives who seem to behave in a manner different from the generalized image of "old."

Items 6 - 9 provide information giving some insight into children's knowledge about old persons, describing some of the common or daily interactions between the children and the old persons they know and reporting some consequent attitudes. In item 6, "What do the old people you know do everyday?," the responses fall into the following groupings: passive responses which include watching TV, reading the newspaper, nothing and lays in bed; work related responses, with the primary responses in this category being "goes to work" or equivalent statements; and active responses, which include gardening, cooking, cleaning and fixing things. On this item differences were noted from the pre-test to the post-test between the children who had an elderly volunteer in their classrooms and those who did not. The change noted occurred in the movement from passive responses to more active responses. In the first and third grades, significant change was noted from 36% to 50% in the active responses and from 8% to 38% respectively, while passive responses were seen to decrease in these two grades. In the groups which did not have the interaction with a volunteer, passive responses either increased or remained the same while the active responses decreased (see Table 2). Based on this, it appears that as children interact consistently with active senior citizen volunteers, their perceptions of the daily behavior of other elderly persons will change from the passive to the more active.

In item 7, "What do you do with old people?," the responses are more activity oriented with the mean response equal to 64%. They include camping, playing together or walking together. While 18% are passive re-

sponses that include talking, writing or being in an old person's lap (see Table 3).

Table 2

Comparison of Responses
Between Children With Program Involvement and Without Program Involvement to "What the Old People they know do everyday" (n = 76)

	% With Program Involvement				% Without Program Involvement			
	1st		3rd		K		4th	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Passive	45	33	42	38	33	40	40	37
Active	36]	50	8	38	17	10	36	21
Work Related	14	8	46	24	33	30	24	26
Don't Know	7	4	4	0	17	20	0	16

Table 3

Comparison of Responses
Between Children With Program Involvement and Without Program Involvement on their responses to "What they do with Old People" (n = 76)

	% With Program Involvement				% Without Program Involvement			
	1st		3rd		K		4th	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Passive	7	25	20	29	24	36	20	21
Active	57	67	80	62	38	64	80	74
Nothing	36	0	0	9	38	0	0	0
Don't Know	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	5

When asked specifically "Do you like doing things with old people?," the overwhelming response across all grades was "yes" with a mean (yes) response of 94%, and an affirmative response of 100% in both the pre and

post-test for the third and fourth grades (see Table 4).

Table 4

Comparison of Responses
Between Children With Program Involvement and Without Program Involvement
to "Whether they like doing things with Old People" (n = 76)

	% With Program Involvement				% Without Program Involvement			
	1st		3rd		K		4th	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Yes	71	100	100	100	83	100	100	89
No	14	0	0	0	8	0	0	0
Don't Know	15	0	0	0	9	0	0	11

Items 9 and 10 attempt to further understand children's perception of being old by asking them to identify distinguishable characteristics associated with old people. The responses clustered in the positive attributes such as kind, nice, helpful, friendly, they love us and they have more time to do things with us. Some unique responses to "What makes old people special?," were, "Everything they do," "They tell us stories," "They are smarter," "They can share adventures," "They can teach us about the past," and "They have been around for so many years, you can learn a lot from them."

In the third grouping of the inventory we presented questions that involved some children's views on older volunteers in the classroom. On item number 11, "What do you think an old person can do with you in school?," their responses fell primarily into the "help us/teach us" category. The mean response in this category for all grades was 85%, with one third grade responding 100% of the time in this category on both the pre and post-test (see Table 5).

Table 5

Comparison of Responses Between Children
With Program Involvement and Without Program Involvement to
"What they think an Old Person can do with them in school" (n=76)

	% With Program Involvement				% Without Program Involvement			
	1st		3rd		K		4th	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Help/Teach Us	64	100	100	100	42	60	92	95
Play/Talk With Us	22	0	0	0	0	30	4	5
Be Mean to Us	0	0	0	0	17	0	0	0
Nothing	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't Know	0	0	0	0	41	10	4	0

For item 12, "Would you like having an old person in your classroom?" the mean "yes" response for the two grades involved with the program increased at the end of the school year from 75% to 94%, while the mean negative responses were seen to decrease from 22% to 7% (see Table 6).

Table 6

Comparison of Responses Between
Children With Program Involvement and Without Program Involvement to
"Whether they would like to have an Old Person in their classroom" (n=76)

	% With Program Involvement				% Without Program Involvement			
	1st		3rd		K		4th	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Yes	50	92	100	95	62	80	72	79
No	43	8	0	5	30	10	20	21
Don't Know	7	0	0	0	8	10	8	0

For item 14 which asks, "Would you go to an old person with a problem

during school time?," a significant increase was noted in the group with program involvement by year's end with an increase in "yes" responses from 66% to 92% (see Table 7).

Table 7

Comparison of Responses Between Children
With Program Involvement and Without Program Involvement to
"Whether they would go to an Old Person with a problem during school time" (n = 76)

	% With Program Involvement				% Without Program Involvement			
	1st		3rd		K		4th	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Yes	64	83	67	100	67	90	72	68
No	36	17	33	0	33	10	28	21
Don't Know	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11

The final item on the inventory asks the children what they think they will be like when they are old. There is a full range of responses to this question including positive, negative and mixed expectations about their own future. Some typical positive responses include: proud of my life, glad and kind, play with my grandchildren, responsible, and much much smarter. Some characteristic negative responses are: mean, grouchy and unhappy with an indication of mixed expectation such as sick and kind, or smart and lonely.

Discussion

After reviewing the data from the pre and post-test administration of the Children's Views on Aging, we have made the following observations:

- children's specific knowledge of the elderly is limited suggesting the need to develop more understanding and awareness of aging.
- children's understanding of aging increases with their own increase in age.
- there is a disparity in children's general perception of being old and aging and their perception based upon their experiences with the old.
- there is movement to more positive, accurate and less stereotypical perceptions of being old noted in those children who had the intergenerational experience relative to those who did not.
- young children as early as age 5 have begun to formulate attitudes toward aging and being old. These attitudes appear to be negative or ambivalent when they refer to the abstract group known as "old" but are dramatically more positive when they refer to the family or are queried about their interest and eagerness to interact with real persons who may be old.

Findings in this study suggest several inconsistencies in children's views on aging: both negative and mixed perceptions of old and a positive view expressed toward old persons combined with a valuing of older volunteers in the classroom.

The results indicate that the negative and mixed perceptions may be reflective of an attitude that is societally based and expressed in the media.

The increase in positive perceptions expressed by a substantial number of children in this study may be reflective of the impact of the consistent intergenerational classroom experience.

The inconsistencies in responses implies that for those children who have had as little as three to five months of consistent interaction with an older person in the classroom attitudes about old age and aging can become more positive and less stereotypical.

Since this limited experience seems to effect change in views on aging we might conclude that consistent experiences with older people can have a significant effect on children's views on aging.

Children's Views on Aging Inventory

1. When does a person become old?

2. How do you think if feels to be old?

3. Who do you know that is old?

4. Do you have grandparents?

5. Do you think they are old?

6. What do the old people you know do every day?

7. What do you do with old people?

8. Do you like doing things with old people?

9. What makes old people special?

10. Do you think old people are usually?

- healthy	- happy	- sad
- fussy	- kind	- friendly
- quiet	- noisy	- bossy
- interesting	- cranky	- patient
- fun	- lonely	- busy
- grouchy	- mean	- funny
- sickly	- helpful	- what else?

11. What do you think an old person can do with you in school?

12. Why would or wouldn't you like having an old person in your classroom?

13. Why do you think they would like to come to your classroom?

14. Would you go to an old person with a problem during school time?

15. What do you think you will be like when you are old?

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